

Preface

The articles included in this issue of *Forum* are among the first to come from Westar's academic seminar on "God and the Human Future." The seminar began its work in 2013, and in what should be clear by what follows, represents something of a departure for Westar. Whereas previous academic seminars were concerned primarily with the ancient world and rooted in historical scholarship (though always with the mission of communicating to the public very much in mind), the God Seminar is much more philosophical, but no less technical. This means that just as the initiation into the historical-critical study of the bible requires a familiarity with the historical timeline of the ancient Near East and a primer on such things as form, source, and redaction criticism, so too might the language and internal deliberations of the God Seminar seem foreboding at first.

Each of the following articles all have in common, in some fashion or another, a concern primarily with the *displacement of theology*. Even more, by concerning themselves with the displacement of theology they also reveal something important about the work of the seminar as a whole. By gathering a group of many of North America's leading theologians and philosophers of religion to engage in a prolonged collaborative research project that aims to probe and communicate the most compelling ways to think and talk about God today, there is no claim to special authority or special access. On the contrary, there is the acceptance and tacit acknowledgement that theology no longer operates as the "queen of the sciences" as it once did at the height of the European middle ages. Theology has become a marginal and marginalized discourse. Even within the world of religion, and among some of the most fervent religious believers and practitioners, theology has no place. To the degree the evangelical priority of religion as a matter of the heart over the head has become the global norm, theology has come to be seen as irrelevant, if not as an outright obstacle, to faith.

Displaced, and perhaps deformed as well, the articles that follow introduce us to what might be for many a surprising cast of characters. From Robbins, we begin with Baruch de Spinoza, a materialist philosopher from the seventeenth century famed for his naturalistic critique of the bible and defense of free inquiry and an open and democratic society, who was excommunicated as a heretic at age twenty-four from his Jewish community. From there, Robbins considers the popular musical artist Prince and the controversial Italian filmmaker and cultural critic Pier Paolo Pasolini in order to make the case that the charge of

heresy and the figure of the heretic no longer carries the same dangerous overtones as it once did. Is this a sign that we no longer take religious beliefs—let alone theology—seriously any longer? Or is it because our religious beliefs—let alone our theology—no longer get at our fundamental values, and so no longer challenge or call us into question in a serious and dangerous way? By invoking figures outside the church who do not do theology as traditionally understood, Robbins is not only establishing an alternative theological archive but is *de facto* making a case for an alternative theological thinking—one that is less invested in preserving and commenting on established, traditional, or authorized ways of talking about God and more interested in religion as a matter of “ultimate concern” that manifests itself in both religious and secular registers.

The postmodern theologian Mark C. Taylor once observed that religion is most interesting where it is least obvious. This observation is an outgrowth of a theology of culture begun by Paul Tillich. It is here where Robbins’ article resonates with those by both Crockett and Galston. Crockett engages Tillich directly. He articulates the connections between Tillich’s pioneering work with the origins of the radical death of God theological movement of the 1960s and beyond. Specifically, Crockett identifies Tillich’s “abiding interest in existentialism,” his “acknowledgement that theological concepts function primarily as symbols,” and his “non-imperialist theology of culture” that matter the most in radical theology’s radical rethinking of what it means to think theologically. Tillich’s theology of culture operates by a method of correlation wherein contemporary culture raises the questions and the Christian faith supplies the answers—culture is the form and faith is the substance. What we have seen over time, however, is that the more theology has allowed contemporary culture to set the agenda by framing the questions, the more the hard-fast distinction between form and substance that Tillich tried to maintain breaks down—or put otherwise, the more extensive and serious the questions raised by contemporary culture, the more the ready-made, faith-based answers seem wanting. It is here where the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is instructive. It is Bonhoeffer who proclaimed it was time for us to “replace our rusty swords with sharp ones.” This was from his unfinished manuscript on ethics from his time in prison before being executed for his involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler. It was also at this time when considering the apparent increasing autonomy of humanity in a “world come of age” that Bonhoeffer suggested we must probe the questions of science, art, ethics, politics, and even religion without the “‘working hypothesis’ called ‘God.’” Crockett takes on these challenges from Bonhoeffer directly as he explores the continuing relevance of Tillich’s political theology.

From Galston, we have not one but two contributions, with each further displaying the displacement of theology. If Tillich cedes the form of theology to contemporary culture, Heidegger thrusts us into the world of the everyday. If Heidegger famously defines the human in terms of *Dasein* (“being-there”)

and characterizes human existence in terms of our “thrownness,” then Galston seems to be suggesting the same for theology. We can say with Galston that theology is thrown-out of the sanctuary provided by a ready-made faith and thrown-into the messy world of everyday reality. So too with his reflections on the archive theology of Paul—as the new paradigm of Pauline studies tries to get at the “real Paul” beyond or before the mythologized Paul of the Christian imagination. Just as theology suffers a kind of displacement, so too is the standard reading of Paul upon whom the myth of Christian origins rests displaced. Drawing from the work of Lloyd Gaston, Brandon Scott, and others, Galston asks what it means if Paul was Jewish to the end, that his critique was not against the Jewish law but Roman imperial rule? Paul then becomes a deeply “transgressive” figure—or, as Galston’s rhetorical analysis shows, Paul is improperly depicted as “the dogmatic theologian and fervent creator of Christianity,” and instead should be seen as the “satirist and counter-strategic genius” that he was.

Together these articles contribute to the building and mining of a new archive of theology. By virtue of its displacement, theology now finds itself free to think God anew.

—Jeffrey W. Robbins